

# MONTECITO

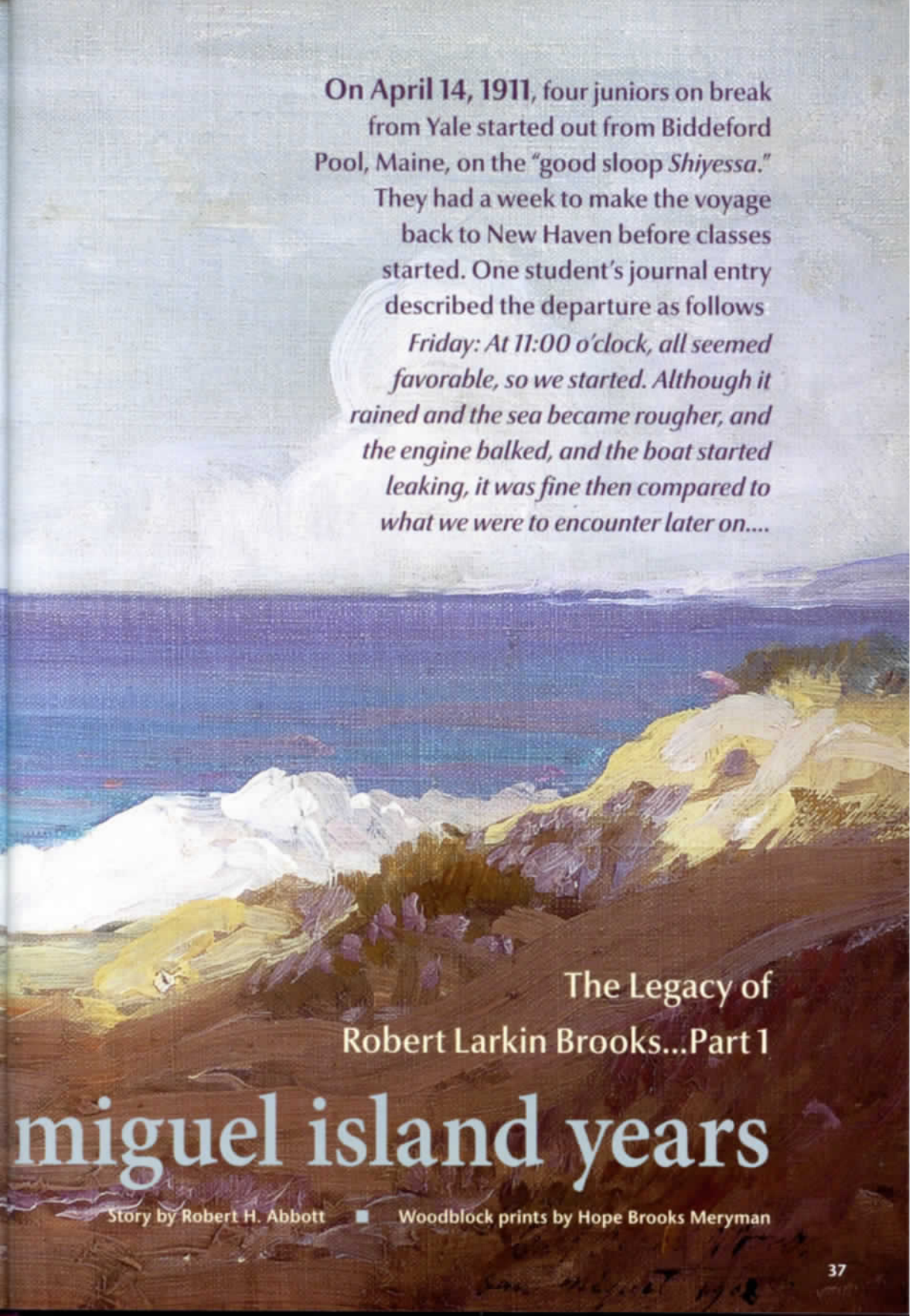
MAGAZINE



C. Chapman







On April 14, 1911, four juniors on break from Yale started out from Biddeford Pool, Maine, on the "good sloop *Shiyessa*."

They had a week to make the voyage back to New Haven before classes started. One student's journal entry described the departure as follows:

*Friday: At 11:00 o'clock, all seemed favorable, so we started. Although it rained and the sea became rougher, and the engine balked, and the boat started leaking, it was fine then compared to what we were to encounter later on....*

The Legacy of  
Robert Larkin Brooks...Part 1

# miguel island years

Story by Robert H. Abbott

Woodblock prints by Hope Brooks Meryman

Fine indeed. Over the course of the next twelve days the crew members tested their nerves through numerous snow squalls, getting lost and running aground on a reef, two dry-dockings (to patch the hull), four days of huddling below deck with kerosene lamps while 70 mile-per-hour winds blew through the bare rigging above, a whiskey-drinking crackpot mechanic who installed a new muffler and gas tank on their poor old Sagamore four-horse engine, and an incessant leak that had to be pumped every hour and forty minutes. It was the worst April anyone could remember. Eight days into the trip they made it ashore to telegraph their families to let them know they were alive. They also contacted Mr. Marvin, the registrar at Yale, and told him not to hold up classes for them. Marvin's reply, which they received five days later when they limped into harbor, was "Don't bother coming back at all."

### the call of the west

Robert (Bob) Larkin Brooks, self-ordained first mate of the good sloop *Shiyessa*, was my grandfather. Five-foot-eight and built like a quarter horse, he was a tough man who thrived in tough conditions. He did eventually graduate from Yale, class of 1912. His suspension the year before, it turned out, only gave him a chance to pursue a bigger adventure: the West.

Philip Brooks, Bob's older brother, had settled in the Imperial Valley a few years prior. He was raising hogs and a new variety of table grape called Thompson Seedless. But he'd run himself into debt, and the irrigation company had shut off his water supply. In a letter from 1911, their father Eugene wrote that Philip was on the verge of "disgracing the family," and that he "owed everyone in the valley." His only solace was that Bob was heading West. "Bob may be extravagant," Eugene wrote, "but he has common sense, and shows it better than Phil in managing and I would trust him quicker, even if he is young."



PHOTOS AND ART COURTESY THE ARBONN FAMILY





As the natural floodplain of the Colorado River, the Imperial Valley contained some of the most productive soil in the world. The first irrigation ditches were dug in 1901 and an agricultural bonanza ensued. But it was an inhospitable place, a desert to rival the Sahara, blazing hot in the summer months.

If it was opportunity that sent Bob Brooks there, then it was opportunity laced with punishment. Maybe, after his stunt with the *Shiyessa*, that was the idea. The only problem was his tenacity: faced with a tough situation, he was a man who only grew stronger. He lived for it, and thrived in the brutally hot climate.

The adventure, the challenge and the promise of prosperity lured him back to the West, where he endured five more long, sweltering summers in the desert. In 1915 he helped build the famous Plank Road from Holtville to Yuma, connecting the Imperial Valley to the rest of the world with 6.5 miles of wooden boards that floated over the shifting Imperial Dunes like a snake.

### san miguel years 1916-1948

In 1916 Bob Brooks began an adventure that spanned nearly three decades and defined much of his life. He had met the Vail family in the Imperial Valley—they ran cattle on ranches throughout southern California and Arizona. The jewel of their holdings was Santa Rosa Island—one of the Channel Islands off the coast of Santa Barbara. Brooks learned there was an opportunity to join in on a lease for the neighboring island, San Miguel. He and Jim Moore, a good friend and financial backer from Connecticut, rounded up \$30,000 for a share in the sheep ranching operation on San Miguel, partnering with the island's longtime rancher and proud resident, Captain William Waters.

**Opening pages** – This 1908 oil painting by Carl Oscar Borg (1879-1947), a prominent artist of early-California landscapes, depicts sheep owned by Captain William G. Waters, San Miguel's longtime rancher.

**Left** – Robert Brooks at San Miguel with Pomo, a white shepherd mix—a gift from actress Jeanette MacDonald—and one of the ranch horses.

**Below** – Woodcut by Hope Brooks Meryman, Robert Brooks' eldest daughter, details a sturdy fence constructed around the ranch house to protect it from the relentless northwest winds.

**Bottom** – View of the barn and sheep pastures used during shearing and "Rancho Rambouillet," the ranch house high on a hill above Cuyler Harbor.



San Miguel Island lies just south of Point Conception, California's "knee," and as such is a focal point for some of the most severe weather and wave conditions on the entire coast. Forty to sixty mile-per-hour gales are the rule, not the exception, and in 1916 travel to the island was limited to calm, clear days—which are rare. When Bob Brooks first arrived on the treeless, 14-square-mile island, sand dunes stretched from coast to coast.

Captain Waters and Bob Brooks were not the first men to run sheep on San Miguel. Ranching began on the island in the 1840s, before statehood, and those who lived there had always considered themselves part of a small but sovereign nation. The island was practically perfect for running sheep: it had no natural predators, a few fresh water springs, 10,000 acres of accessible grazing land and endless meadows of windswept, fog-wet grass. Fencing needs were minimal, of course, because it was an island.

By 1916 San Miguel was famously overgrazed. When Brooks partnered with Captain Waters, the sheep numbered 1,600, down from about 4,000 two decades before and 6,000 in the 1850s. Brooks blamed Waters for much of the damage: in 1888 he had plowed over 400 acres to plant grain. The ensuing rains "...washed all 400 acres into the harbor. That's what started all the erosion out there," he recalled. With the topsoil gone, the wind gained the upper hand, and sand dunes bloomed across the landscape.

Brooks and Waters did not get along. He later remembered the old Civil War Captain as "...an old bastard from Boston who'd get in every parade and wave flags around." They fought continuously. The partnership probably wouldn't have lasted very long, but four months after Bob's arrival Waters died of a stroke. Brooks and Moore bought the remaining share and assumed control of the lease for \$200 a year.

John and Ida Russell were the ranch caretakers at that time and after Waters' death the only permanent residents of the island. They had built an eight-room ranch house for themselves and the itinerant shearers out of salvaged lumber from a freighter that had run aground years before. The house was shaped like an A with its point facing the persistent northwest winds, and as long as it stood it smelled like seaweed and tar. Windows would have shattered on the windward side of the house, so they used the ship's old portholes.

Brooks made the trip out to the island twice a year, staying for a month or two at a time for shearing, lambing, cutting and shipping. He assembled a crude pier every spring for shipping the lambs, sheep and wool, and took it down every fall anticipating the winter's storms. He worked side by side with the ranch hands and shearers, riding in the roundup, docking tails, hauling wool and separating the herd. He built a barge to carry the animals from pier to boat, which he used for three decades. He loved the island for the hard work and the rough lifestyle it demanded, but also for the solitude and unique, forced camaraderie among its few inhabitants—good drink, smoke and conversation after a long day's work.



PHOTOS AND ART COURTESY THE ARBETT FAMILY



In 1917 Bob Brooks met Hope Palmer of Lakewood, New Jersey. She was traveling with her mother in Santa Barbara, and he was passing through on route to San Miguel. They met at a party and it was practically love at first sight. At the end of the evening he told her, "I'll see you again someday, Miss Palmer." She was seventeen.

That same year, 1917, Brooks was called into service. He was a captain of the 29th Division Coast Artillery and served in France for 21 months. Jim Moore managed the island during his leave (with the help of the Vails on neighboring Santa Rosa Island). The vision of Hope Palmer occupied his thoughts on the front; he wrote her whenever he could. In a letter dated January 1919, just weeks from coming home, he wrote:

As some writer said if you haven't some great object in life, a great love or something to that effect, that the war and the army makes a man become morally loose; I'll go him one better and say crazy, but I guess you are the object Hope or better said the great love, so I still manage to keep my faculties, but if it wasn't for your letters and you I am afraid I would take about as much interest in life as a Russian prisoner in Germany.

Brooks returned from the war with a few scars, a German Mauser and a few new friends, including Herbie Lester. He settled in Los Angeles where he invested in rural real estate and farmed dry beans and later sugar beets. His passion for San Miguel Island deepened, and he worked hard to bring the land back into good condition. His love for Hope Palmer, who was staying with her family back East,

Left - Frank "Frenchy" Gonzalez, a regular member of the sheep shearing crew, collects wool for packing into 300-pound sacks.

Below - A woodcut by Hope Brooks Meryman captures the annual sheep shearing operation.

Bottom - Herbie and Elise Lester transporting supplies from the beach at Cuyler Harbor up to their "Rancho Rambouillet" home a mile away.



deepened as well. He wrote these lines in an eighty-page letter to her during one of his first trips back to the island:

This is certainly a windy, desolate, windswept, barren little isle, it is attractive for just that reason and unique in character; even in the Channel Islands, there is nothing like San Miguel. It would be a great place for a monastery as there is nothing to disturb your thoughts or study, there is no one to commune with but God. I never realized what a peculiar place it is until now, I can see why it makes people peculiar and almost crazy, especially when you love someone 3,000 miles away—I brought your pictures with me Hope so I at least have companionship by proxy, by the end of the month I will be talking to them out loud.

After six years of courtship Robert Larkin Brooks married Hope Palmer in Los Angeles on May 1, 1923. Their honeymoon, however, was usurped by drought. It hadn't rained a drop that year and the sheep needed good pasture. The last major drought on San Miguel was 60 years prior, in 1863, when 80 percent of the herd was lost. Bob Brooks knew he had to do something, and fast. He wrote to Ed Vail, who had started a lease on an even more remote island: San Nicolas, 40 miles south of San Miguel. Brooks assumed the San Nicolas lease for the year, split his herd and shipped them over. He brought Hope along that first spring while he and John Russell built a rudimentary ranch house. Until it was completed, they slept in bedrolls on wooden boards, a far cry from the down pillows that was Mrs. Robert Larkin Brooks's due.

The Twenties were rough. Light rain, or none at all, meant Bob had to reduce the number of ani-

Below — Sheep await shearing at "Rancho Rambouillet"—the sacked wool was transported by sled down to Cuyler Harbor.

Bottom — Robert Brooks, second from right, poses with a shearing crew and Pomo, the resident island dog.

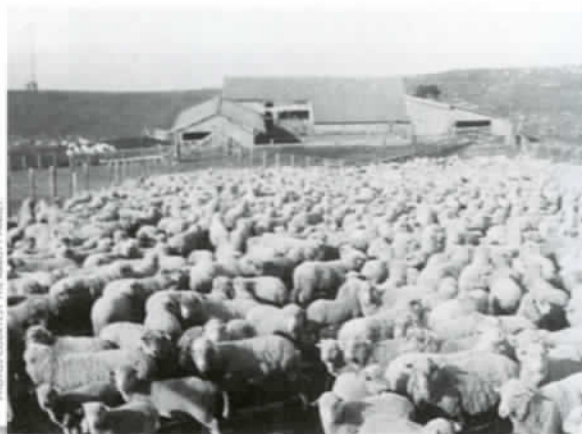


PHOTO COURTESY THE ARBOTT FAMILY





mals he ran on the island; the sheep were thin and so was their wool. No mutton was sold in 1924 because of hoof and mouth disease. He tried restocking his herd, but many of the new sheep died from eating lupine and locoweed that the resident Rambouillet breed avoided. But Bob was determined, and he continued to run animals on both San Miguel and San Nicolas. In 1925 he renewed his five-year lease with the United States government for San Miguel—this time as sole lessee.

In 1929, after more than 20 years of island life, the Russells left San Miguel to retire on the mainland. Bob Brooks needed a new caretaker for the island and thought of his friend Herbie Lester. Lester had served in WWI with Brooks; he was traveled and educated but suffered from shell shock from the war (now called post-traumatic stress disorder) and was tired of mainland life. He sailed out in the spring of 1929 to help with the shearing and fell in love with the island.

The experience gave Lester an idea: he wanted to partner with Bob Brooks and eventually assume the lease himself. Brooks agreed and they worked with a newfound energy. Herbie, sure that a bright and prosperous future lay ahead, married his love, Elizabeth "Elise" Sherman. A few months later the stock market crashed and the Depression years followed. Brooks lost most of his savings and working capital and the deal was shelved, but Herbie and Elise stayed on the island and made a warm and comfortable home for themselves. Herbie was a clever and resourceful man and the ranching operations thrived under his care. He christened the island "Rancho Rambouillet" after the sheep he tended, and built himself the "Killer Whale Bar," which he stocked with some liquor but mostly old, empty bottles and artifacts he found on the shore. When Herbie dubbed himself Herbert I, the King of San Miguel, no one contested his claim.

In the spring of 1937 Bob Brooks nearly died on the island. He was working with Herbie, putting in the pier, when he lost his footing reaching for a fourteen-pound sledge. He sailed through the air to the ironwork below where he impaled himself on a twelve-inch bolt (in later stories, it grows to fourteen). He was hurt badly. The bolt had entered his buttocks and glanced off his hip bone. It was hard just to lift himself off of it. He swam to shore, the water red with blood. Herbie helped him onto the crude horse-drawn sled and hauled him up to the ranch house. Bob drank a quart of wine as an anesthetic while Herbie boiled a five-inch wool-sack needle and some fishing line in disinfectant and water. Using a hardcover book to back the needle, Herbie stitched him up. There was no way to communicate with the mainland, so Herbie flew



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the flag upside down as a distress signal hoping a passing plane or boat might notice.

None did. Brooks lay prone for two weeks on the island, Herbie and Elise his nurses. They bandaged him with whatever they had on hand: bedsheets and diapers, and when these ran out, sanitary pads. The Vail's boat, *Vaquero*, was due to arrive for shipping within a few days when Hope, home in Los Angeles, had a premonition that something was wrong on the island. She ran down to the Vail's office and told Russ to send the boat early.

Back on the mainland, Brooks was rushed to Santa Barbara Cottage Hospital. The doctors were impressed with Herbie's stitching and with Brooks's strength. They cleaned the wound with "a gallon of Mercurchrome," he later recalled. Upon his release, when he asked what he owed, the doctor replied, "I'd be a dirty crook if I took five cents from you after two weeks of what you went through." Brooks laughed it off and promptly had a case of Bacardi rum delivered to the doctor.

World War II changed things on San Miguel. By Christmas 1941 all communication with the mainland was cut except for authorized boat and plane landings, and three Navy officers were assigned to live with the Lesters in the main ranch house. Herbie, a veteran himself, was incensed at their lack of courtesy and know-how. The Lesters served them three meals a day, and he felt they didn't do their share to help out. Herbie was out chopping wood to feed the stove that fed the three extra mouths when he cut off two fingers. He was flown by a Navy seaplane to the hospital in Long Beach where surgeons failed to reattach his fingers. He spent a month on the mainland recuperating and taking the sulfa drugs they prescribed to prevent infection.

Herbie returned to the island a changed man. The drugs had affected his vision and his mind, and the depression that came on tore away at the optimism and peace that San Miguel had built inside him. He did his part in the docking that spring, but was overcome with frustration at his lack of

Below – Robert Brooks, left, oversees the loading of sheep onto the barge he built and used for 30 years to transport sheep from pier to boat.

Bottom – The pier behind Elise Lester, right, was erected every spring and disassembled every fall in preparation for the harsh winter storms.



PHOTOS COURTESY THE ABBOTT FAMILY





strength and dexterity. On June 18, 1942, Herbie spotted the *Vaquero* coming into harbor with Bob Brooks and the shearing crew aboard. Then he walked over to his favorite grassy knoll overlooking the harbor and shot himself. The next day the crew built a simple coffin and dug a grave where they found him. They dressed Herbie in his Army trenchcoat and laid him to rest with his revolver.

The King was dead, and the golden days of San Miguel had begun to tarnish. Brooks continued his lease on the island for another six years, employing two more caretaker couples: an old Norwegian sailor, Ulmar Englund, and his wife, Rae; and later Al and Rosie Baglin. But the Navy continued to limit the number of sheep Brooks could run on the island, and in 1948 they revoked the lease completely: guided missile and bomb targets would be placed in shallow waters offshore and drops that missed could hit the island itself. Brooks was given 72 hours to remove his belongings: 2,000 sheep, barges and boats, mules, horses, a Jeep, some barn cats and Pomo, the island dog. He could also take the ranch house and shearing barn if he wanted them. It was a ridiculous order. He tried to fill it anyway but left behind four horses and five hundred sheep.

That same year Brooks suffered a heart attack while digging a water line at home on Hilltop Ranch in Carpinteria. It slowed him down, and he never returned to the island. In 1950 the Navy gave permission for a crew to return to the island and round up the missing sheep, so he sent Don Butler (his future son-in-law) out to lead the crew. Don witnessed firsthand the abuse the Navy had paid the island: "They herded the sheep by plane, drove them into canyons and strafed them, just left them there to rot." The crew returned with the Jeep, the horses, and most of the sheep, but a few burros and a dozen sheep continued to roam wild for the next sixteen years. Brooks never forgave the government for what they did to his island. He filed an appeal directly to Congress for damages and liability, and it was heard on the floor but quickly turned down, as all private appeals are.

In 1961 E.R. Blakely, a naturalist, was given permission to land on the island. He reported that the ranch house was still standing, but in bad disrepair, windows shot out and doors hanging loose on their hinges. By 1967 all the structures had been burned, leaving only the fireplace that Herbie Lester had built nearly 40 years before. ♦

*The Legacy of Robert Larkin Brooks...Part 2, continues on page 50.*

*For more information about life on San Miguel Island, refer to San Miguel Island: My Childhood Memoir 1930-1942 by Betsy Lester Roberti, Herbie Lester's daughter, published by the Santa Cruz Island Foundation in 2008.*

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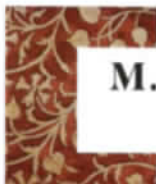
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# mainland roots and

The Legacy of  
Robert Larkin Brooks...

Part 2





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# hilltop ranch

Story by Robert H. Abbott

Art by Meredith Brooks Abbott & Whitney Brooks Abbott

In 1942 Robert Larkin Brooks, my grandfather, moved for the last time. He'd been a hard-working man of the West for 30 years—a farmer and rancher—and it had shaped his restless character. Or maybe he was just plain restless to

begin with, but he was a prudent man and knew one thing about the West in particular, and farming in general—you never know how things might turn out and if they turn out well, you put it away for a rainy day.

Carpinteria promised a slower-paced life where he could put down some roots and nurture his most important crop—family.

PHOTO COURTESY THE BROOKS FAMILY



The Brooks family, standing in front of the vine-covered pergola at Hilltop Ranch. Left to right: son, Robert, in front of Robert Larkin Brooks, Palmer, Hope, Whitney, Meredith in jeans and Mrs. Brooks (Hope).

### putting down mainland roots

Bob Brooks had weathered drought, crop failure, the famine of his herds, the Great Depression and with it the total loss of his savings, and the death of friends and family, and he still managed to come out ahead. So when the time came to settle down and live out a lifelong dream of building his own home and raising his family on a farm, he had his eyes set on Carpinteria. Midway between his acreage in Oxnard and the Santa Barbara Harbor (jumping-off point for his Channel Islands sheep ranches), Carpinteria promised a slower-paced life where he could put down some roots and nurture his most important crop: family.

Eleven years earlier, in 1931, Bob and Hope Brooks had their first child, named Hope after her mother. They had three more girls and a boy in the next eight years—Palmer (Blue), Whitney, Meredith (Ky, my mother) and Robert (Bobby). The thirties were bountiful in other ways too: He thrived on island life at the San Nicolas and San Miguel island ranches, and the sheep operations there were turning a profit. Then in 1935 he was able to partner with Barney Flynn in the purchase of 700 acres at the base of the Conejo Grade in Ca-

marillo. They planted dry beans and sugar beets and also leased neighboring acreage. Farming there was tough work, and often trying: the east winds could blow so hard through Ventura County that windrows of beans would lift up and roll across the fields; by the time they stopped against a leeward fence the rolls of bean plants would be knotted so tight you couldn't drive a pitchfork into them.

After all was said and done the farming was never much more than marginally profitable, but fortunately the land was. The partnership dissolved after a few years and Brooks, with profits from the sale of the Camarillo land, was able to buy his own land in Oxnard. He was also able to do something he'd been meaning to do for quite a while—he bought a farm in Carpinteria where he could raise his children. He called the Carpinteria property Hilltop Ranch and started sketching plans for a rambling mission-style ranch house. In many ways it resembled Rancho Rambouillet, the main ranch house on San Miguel.

The family moved to Hilltop Ranch in 1942—Bob, Hope, their five children, Hope's mother





A familiar figure at farmers markets, Robert Abbott is following in the farming footsteps of his father and grandfather, connecting with the land to make a living.



History has repeated itself—William and David have a few goats they milk and tend, and Tessa and I are growing two acres of flowers and beans that we sell at the local farmers' markets.



Getting ready for market, Tessa, Robert Abbott's wife, fills buckets with colorful Hilltop Ranch-grown flowers.

and her nurse. The house Bob built was long and sprawling, with a cavernous fireplace you could roast a lamb in. During the war construction materials were scarce, so they built with cinderblocks and cement—modern adobe—and flagstone for floors. Hope planted a half-acre garden around the house with roses and English ivy, and with honeysuckle and wild grapes climbing over pergolas. To the kids it was paradise, a place for discovery and full of fantasy. "It was idyllic," my mom Meredith recalls. "We had a tremendous amount of freedom—the things they let us do you wouldn't believe." She used to ride her horse bareback to the beach, a mile away, or up the canyon to what they called the Valley of the Moon, the headwaters of Rincon Creek. Sixty acres surrounded the ranch house, and

they planted more dry beans and later a lemon orchard. On a clear day, you could see San Miguel Island—just a blue line on the horizon, set between two lighter blues.

Though Hilltop offered Bob Brooks a chance to settle down, he still relished the rougher side of a working man's life. The call of San Miguel was just as strong twenty years after his first trip out to the island. If he was the perfect host and gentleman in his beautiful new ranch house, he was the same old roughneck when it came to getting the job done and have fun doing it. It was during this time he developed a reputation in Santa Barbara for emptying out the drunk tank when he needed a couple extra hands during the sheep roundup on the island. The city fathers were glad to let the petty offenders finish their



ILLUSTRATION © WHITNEY BROOKS ABBOTT



time on a remote island working with a bunch of sheep. One evening the Vail family, who had a ranch on Santa Rosa Island, called asking for Bob Brooks. His mother-in-law answered the phone. "He's off gathering his shepherds," her voice quavered. Peals of laughter came down the line.

Back in Carpinteria, Bob and Hope instilled a love of the natural world in their children, as well as a huge work ethic—the farm chores were serious business. At the same time Bob and Hope also imbued a sense of independence and a responsibility of character in all the children. "We each thought we were, in a way, special—and not in the same way," my mom remembers. "They taught us that."

Every one of the Brooks girls was an artist, and they spent many hours sketching and painting the natural world around them. Bob Brooks would never call himself an artist, but his ledgers were full of sketches that were so effortless and strong they deserve acclaim. The talent for art obviously ran in the blood and he encouraged the girls to develop their skills. It's a testament to his encouragement, and to the girls' passion for art, that every one of them—Hope Meryman, Palmer Brooks Butler, Whitney Brooks Hansen, and Meredith Brooks Abbott—has pursued it professionally.

My mother, Meredith, married Duncan Abbott, a boy who grew up on an avocado orchard half a mile down the road, in 1969. They returned to Carpinteria in 1974 to take over management of both family farms (see *Montecito Magazine*, spring 2004). My mom still spends most of her time painting the landscape she grew up loving.

Bobby, the youngest, took an interest in farming early on. It was a natural thing that he succeed his father, and the encouragement there was a given. After college Bobby started farming the Oxnard property in 1963 and soon built it into one of the best farms in the valley. By the early 1980s his company, San Miguel Produce, grew row crops on 3,000 acres, on several plots stretching from the Salinas Valley all the way down to the blazing sands of the once-wild Imperial Valley.

### ongoing legacy of hilltop ranch

**Robert Larkin Brooks died in 1973.** He suffered from a series of strokes which disabled him. In the last weeks, he slipped into a coma from which he never awoke. His heart was the last thing to give out.

My name is Robert too—we do recycle names in this family. Three years ago my wife Tessa and I moved into the ranch house at Hilltop, along with my brother William and his partner David. It's a big house even for the four of us, and after 70 years it needs a little work. History

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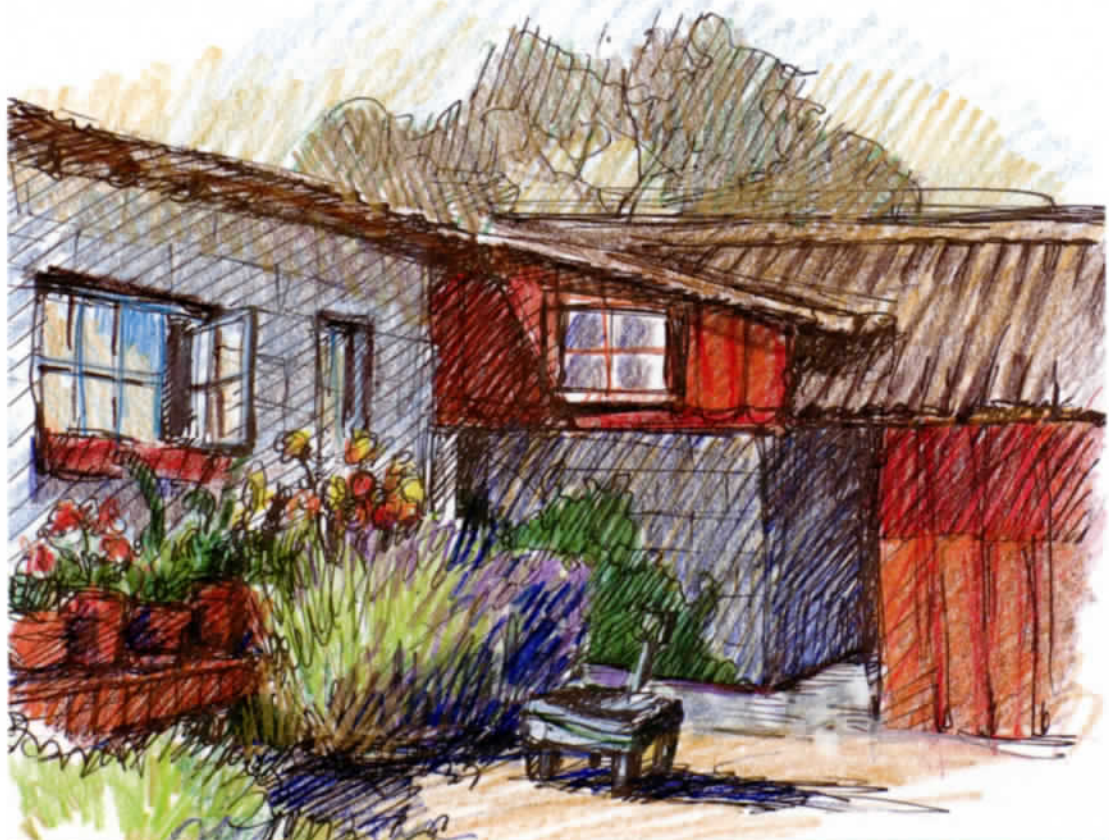
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We are all committed to this land, and we're lucky because we are all in agreement: we have to save what's left because this land has fed us, produced for us, inspired us, taught us and defined who we are.



Building materials were scarce during the war years of the early 1940s. Robert Larkin Brooks used cinderblocks and cement to build the ranch house at Hilltop.

has repeated itself—William and David have a few goats they milk and tend, and Tessa and I are growing two acres of flowers and beans that we sell at local farmers' markets. We irrigate the beans—my grandfather didn't—and we harvest them fresh, not dried, but we're planting limas in this soil just as he did 60 years ago. Every spring I rip our couple acres with a two-foot shank. It's the toughest clay in the world; if any soil could give you a heart attack, this is it.

My brother William, sister Whitney and I are lucky. We're lucky for a lot of reasons—growing up, like my parents did, on a farm, close to nature, unafraid of dirt and hard work. We're lucky because our parents, as theirs before them, gave us the freedom to explore and admire the natural world, and they taught us to pay attention to

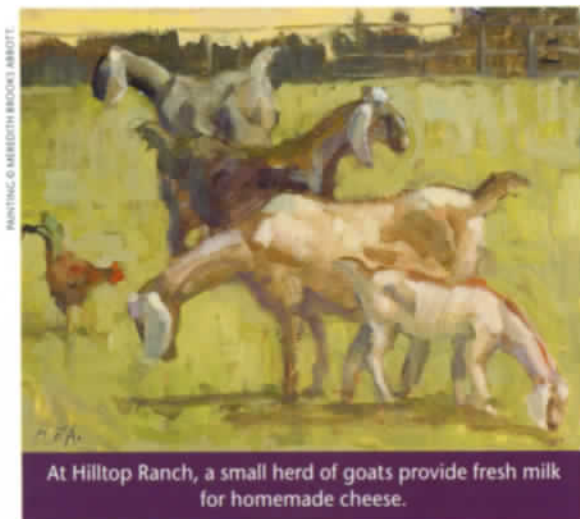
nature—to the health of the trees, the richness of a working soil—and to take a second or two to admire how the dying light makes the foothills glow. We are all committed to this land, and we're lucky because we are all in agreement: we have to save what's left because this land has fed us, produced for us, inspired us, taught us and defined who we are.

I never got the chance to meet Robert Larkin Brooks—he died before I was born—but he has left a legacy that 35 years later still impacts me. He started something with his enthusiasm, his thirst for adventure, his love of the natural world, his work ethic. The land shaped him too, though it seems he really was built for it, thriving in tough conditions. It's hard not to think about his time



on San Miguel Island and what it meant for him. Island life is unique in this world. Once upon a time a man put himself in a situation where he had to work with what he had. On an island, resourcefulness is a necessity—resourcefulness of the environment, of the homemade tools he worked with, resourcefulness of his mind for entertainment: a good story, good company, a single good thought like a shot in the dark, a bird hurtling by on the wind. Above all, he had to be resourceful in spirit. Too much freedom can be a curse, and there's nothing like an island to put you close to the Absolute. San Miguel was a temple for a handful of men.

Once he was ensconced at Hilltop, Robert Larkin Brooks would look back on his early years



At Hilltop Ranch, a small herd of goats provide fresh milk for homemade cheese.

with an attitude that was counter to the optimism of his youth. Maybe his dry sense of humor finally got the upper hand, maybe it was a way for him to cope with his lack of mobility after his strokes, and the fact that he'd never see his island again. "It was something he couldn't do anymore," my mom recalls, "and that was such a part of him." In this way, it was almost modesty. He

talked down his early days on the island, calling it "...the most dismal wind-swept damned hole in the world." But there was a brightness to his voice—as if to say, well, it may be a damned hole but you can still have a hell of a time there. ♦

Robert Abbott is currently writing a book about his grandfather.



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